

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

WE BECOME WHAT WE BEHOLD

Not long ago, Australia passed a law banning social media accounts for youth under age 16. The UK is pondering a similar ban. At least 35 states currently have laws or rules restricting the use of cellphones and other electronic devices during the school day. Excessive use of social media is apparently not just a problem among teenagers. Pick up a newspaper or magazine and you will likely find an article on “How to Break your Social Media Addiction.” Most of these laws, rules, and news reports express alarm at how social media is rewiring our brains in harmful ways. And not just those of children but of adults as well.

For a long time, I wondered what the fuss was all about. I thought all the hysteria about social media was the latest iteration of age-old resistance to how new technologies inevitably change our lives. As far back as ancient Greece, Plato was opposing the introduction of a new innovation called “written books” because he believed it would ruin our ability to remember things on our own. As a child in the 1950s, I remember adult hand-wringing over the negative effects on children’s reading skills of the widespread availability of comic books.

I have decided that social commentators opposed to cellphones, apps, and social media were, in fact, wrong about the possible negative effects of digital technologies and social media. These technologies are actually worse for us than these commentators imagined possible. Recent research is suggesting we are experiencing dramatic declines in people’s ability to think deeply, to process information accurately, to maintain sustained attention, and to perform basic reading and math skills. As a *Financial Times* headline recently asked, “Have Humans Passed Peak Brain Power?” A long-term research study at the University of California, Irving, has reported that American attention spans have decreased by about one-third since 2004. A preliminary study from MIT discussed recently in the *New York Times* found that there is a “significant negative correlation between frequent A.I. tool usage and critical thinking abilities” and that “brain connectivity systematically scaled down with the amount of external support.” These researchers are finding that our social media and digital technologies are likely eroding significantly the capacity to hold our attention on a task, an idea, or even the person directly interacting with us. These technologies, they tentatively conclude, threaten our ability to read closely, think deeply, and live creatively.

But, you ask, “why should the church care about such things?” After all, what does our attention economy and its digital technologies have to do with spiritual matters? The answer is that the ability to hold one’s attention matters a lot when it comes to Christian faith and practice. It is not by accident that Christians are sometimes described as “a people of the Book” or that the Protestant Reformation was sparked by the invention of a particular new technology: The printing press and the widespread expansion of literacy it made possible. If people become less efficient readers, what does it mean for a spiritual tradition that is based on reading of and listening to the Bible? So crucial are these cognitive skills to Christian faith and practice that the Reformation’s slogan was *Sola Scriptura* (by scripture alone) What does it mean to “listen to the God who is still speaking” when our attention spans have diminished by one-third since 2004?

Intimacy with God requires sustained attention and reflective thinking both individually and collectively. Perhaps the most counter-cultural thing the church can do in our present society is to teach the art of sustaining one's attention on a person, task, or idea of importance and value to us. This doesn't mean throwing out the benefits that new technologies and communication tools bring. It does mean thinking carefully about how, where, and when we use them to enrich our lives rather than to diminish them. These new technologies bring us beautiful gifts; but they can also steal essential virtues and qualities from us. Particularly when it comes to our spiritual lives. A life well lived requires a capacity for attention. Without the ability to give our attention completely to another person, what can love mean? In a world that fragments our attention how can we be mindful and grateful if we are too distracted to notice a beautiful sunset or a joyful toddler playing on a swing-n-slide?

20th-century philosopher Simone Weil wrote, "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer." I invite us to explore what is required to sustain a life of prayer in a world where digital content and algorithms are intentionally designed to snatch our attention, sift, and scatter it like dandelion seeds blowing in the wind. What we allow to distract us and scatter our attention prevents us from focusing on what ultimately matters most to us. Here are some suggestions:

- The first step might be to notice where your attention goes throughout your day. Where are the spaces and activities that most distract you from giving your full attention to what you are doing or who you are with?
- What are the spaces, people, or activities (particularly social media ones) that divide and drain your attention?
- Likewise, what, when, and where are the activities and spaces in which you feel fully present, fully alive?
- What times of the day or in what kinds of situations do you most reach for something to distract you? When are your energies most focused and alive? Are there certain days or times when it's simpler to maintain your full attention on what matters to you? Days and times when it's really difficult to maintain sustained attention?

Just be curious. Simply observe when and where your attention drifts into distraction as well as where and when you feel most focused and your attention is fully engaged and present. Let this exercise be simply a fact-finding experience and not a shame-spiral. Make some notes on what you observe and ask yourself what surprises you or what is confirmed that you already intuitively knew. Next week I'll give a few more suggestions on what to ask yourself next in light of this exercise.

Our attention belongs to us. It does not belong to the algorithms and short-form videos designed by others who are profiting from our attention economy by capturing and holding our attention on what they want. We are called instead to allocate our attention to what matters most to us. As Simone Weil asserts, our attention itself is a form of prayer. Prayer, after all, is not a sequence of words we say or read. Prayer is a practice of being in the presence of the Holy, which requires attention to our habits of heart and mind.

The English mystic and poet William Blake once said, "We become what we behold," which is a way of saying that we become that to which we give our attention. Or, as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

Easter Blessings!

Pastor Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

PLENTY OF COOKIES and SNACKS!!!

Your Mission and Outreach Committee was so excited to deliver 2 trays of delicious home-baked cookies, as well as a huge variety of packaged snacks to our wonderful first responders. We surprised the only two police officers who were on duty (because it was a holiday), BUT those 2 officers were very happy to be working, very happy to accept (and share?) our generous donation. Likewise, the 2 firemen on duty appreciated the kindness of our always generous congregation. Thanks to all who baked and contributed to this mission of caring and thanks.



NOTE FROM YOUR MODERATOR

Happy Spring!

As the temperatures warm and our bulb flowers are making an appearance this all signals the arrival of a couple of events.

First, the "Earth Day 2026" cleanup is on Saturday, May 2nd.

We pull together a team of folks who work from around 9 am for a couple hours cleaning up our neighborhood. We break off into small groups and do roadside pickup of trash and other abandoned treasures on a short length of Porter Road, Somers Road, around the rotary and obviously the greensward between the church and the rotary. If you are available to help out for an hour or 2 on May 2nd. Let us know so we can register as a team by April 30.

After the teams complete cleanup of our area the bags of trash and recyclable items (bagged separately) will be brought to the East Longmeadow transfer station. We will meet at the church around 8:30am with coffee in hand and enjoy a bit of active fellowship on a Saturday morning!

The second event that Spring brings us is the annual meeting.

This year the First Congregational Church of East Longmeadow/UCC Annual Meeting will be held immediately after service in the sanctuary on May 17. You will see a warrant to call the meeting soon with the details and agenda. The first item will be to read and vote to accept the presented slate of officers and Board members that will be presented prior to the meeting in the annual report from church leadership. There will be a few changes, as is normal, to some of the Boards and committees so if you, as a member, feel like you want to engage with a particular board please reach out! Enjoy the Spring!

PIANO RECITAL this Sunday

If you enjoy classical piano, please join us for a free performance on Sunday, April 26 at 2:00 pm at the First Congregational Church. A variety of piano pieces, including those by Handel, Mozart, Liszt and others well be performed by the students Despite their youth, many of the students have won competitions and even played at the NYC Carnegie Hall. Refreshments will be served.

I hope we will have a good crowd for this enjoyable afternoon!

SPRING PLANT SALE

Spring is finally here and it is time to start digging, splitting and potting up your perennials, shrubs, vines, ground covers, etc. for us to sell at our annual plant sale. It will be held on May 9th from 9am-1pm. We are looking for volunteers to work the day of the fair and on Friday as we set up for the sale.

We will also be looking for cookies, brownies, breads, and any other baked goods to sell that day as well. If you have any garden or yard related items that you would like to donate for our tag sale, you can place them on the stage anytime before the sale. We are looking for things like pretty pots, vases, garden tools, statuary, bird houses, garden books, yard games, etc. If you have any books, puzzles or used jewelry, we can use those for our sale as well. It is a good time to clean out your sheds, garages, closets and shelves. We will put your donations to good use.

Thanks so much in advance for your participation and donations.

The Spring Plant Sale Committee

PRAYER FOR GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

O God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice, we may know him as the One who calls us each by name. For only his silhouette against the night sky brings comfort when we lie down in unknown pastures; and only his staff protects us when we find ourselves surrounded by threats. May our restless hearts find peace as we rest in Christ. Amen.



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